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Spy Story

"Rudolph Albert Herrmann," the deep-cover Soviet KGB colonel, asked people in his Westchester suburb about their choices for president and reported the responses to his masters in the Kremlin. In 11 years, he never stole a secret.

One of the revelations in the FBI's extraordinary press conference for its latest KGB catch was that much of spying is not merely humdrum but proper. No secrets or illegality are involved. It is a little like the "revelations" by Iranian terrorists holding Americans hostage in the U.S. embassy "nest of spies" in Tehran. The activities "uncovered" so far are what every embassy is supposed to be doing in every country.

Of course, there was more to Colonel Herrmann than talking politics with ordinary folks. He maintained clandestine routes for communications by other spies. That is the real thing. Illegally gathered security and industrial secrets no doubt traveled his route.

He tried once to harass NASA with anonymous phone calls of disinformation, but to no effect. And most impressive, he took 10 years to get from West Germany to residence in the United States, indicating a patience on the part of his superiors that ordinary Americans cannot understand and with which American counterspies have trouble coping.

But more mysterious even than Colonel Herrmann is why the FBI put on this bit of theatrics worthy of J. Edgar Hoover when the Cold War was new. Was it to alert ordinary Americans to the danger that the innocuous next door neighbor might be a sinister spy? Doubtful. To pin one on the Russians now that the Cold War is tensing up? The KGB already knew that Colonel Herrmann had gone over, and five spy-diplomats were quietly withdrawn last year. To embarrass the Kremlin publicly? Perhaps.

Or was it to create a public climate of approval for wide-ranging FBI activities with a demonstration that there are real spies out there, now that Congress is considering an FBI charter that might inhibit some of those activities?

There *are* real spies out there and we need the FBI to guard effectively against them. Colonel Herrmann by his own and the FBI's account was a small fish who never damaged this country as Rudolph Abel and Kim Philby did. The next one might.

Colonel Herrmann of the silhouette and disguised voice has retreated to his new identity, and the FBI speaks guardedly, so the mystery of the Herrmann press conference may not be cleared up. But everyone likes a good mystery.